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IN THE CLAIMS:

1. (currently amended) A thumb guard comprising an elongated strap formed of flexible, resilient material and presenting a pair of opposed end segments, said end segments folded together in overlapping relationship and interconnected by a stitch to define a tapered, open-ended, thumb-receiving passageway having a relatively large open end and an opposed, relatively small open end, said guard configured so that when placed on a thumb by passing the thumb into said passageway through said relatively large open end, portions of the guard proximal said relatively large open end cover and thereby protect the metacarpophalangeal joint of the thumb from undue stresses.
2. (original) The thumb guard of claim 1, said end segments fixedly secured to each other.
3. (currently amended) The thumb guard of claim 2, said overlapping end segments being secured by a plurality of stitches.
4. (original) The thumb guard of claim 1, said strap having a width that does not vary more than by a factor of two.
5. (original) The thumb guard of claim 1, said flexible material being padded.
6. (original) The thumb guard of claim 5, said padded material having a thickness of from about 1/8" to about 1/4".
7. (currently amended) A thumb guard comprising a tubular, tapered body formed of flexible, resilient material, said body defining a tapered, open-ended, thumb-receiving passageway having a relatively large open end and an opposed, relatively small open end, said guard configured so that when placed on a thumb by passing the thumb into said passageway through said relatively large open end, end portions of the guard proximal said relatively large open end are oriented relative to one another in an oppositely inclined relationship so as to present a double layer of the flexible, resilient material to cover and protect the metacarpophalangeal joint of the thumb from undue stresses.

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8. (original) The thumb guard of claim 7, said body formed from a padded flexible fabric material.

9. (original) The thumb guard of claim 8, said padded flexible fabric material having a thickness of less than about 1/4".

10. (original) A method of protecting tissues of the thumb and hand while a person holds a paint bucket having a bail and comprising:

providing tubular, tapered body formed of flexible, resilient material, said body defining a tapered, open-ended, thumb-receiving passageway having a relatively large open end and an opposed, smaller open end, defined in part by oppositely inclined, overlapping, interconnected end segments joined to a central segment, said body configured to generally complementally receive a person's thumb so that when placed on a thumb by passing the thumb into said passageway through said relatively large open end;

inserting a thumb to be protected into said passageway through the large open end thereof; and

orienting said body with respect to said thumb with portions of the body in generally covering protecting relationship to the metacarpophalangeal joint of the thumb to protect the thumb and said joint from undue stresses while the user holds a bucket with the thumb hooked under the bail of the bucket.

11. (original) The method of claim 10, said flexible body comprising a padded flexible material.

12. (original) The method of claim 11, said padded flexible material having a thickness of about 1/8" to about 1/4".

13. (currently amended) The method of claim 10 said end portions being secured by a plurality of stitches.

14. (original) The method of claim 10, said strap having a width that does not vary more than by a factor of two.

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15. (currently amended) A thumb guard for protecting a person's thumb while the individual holds a bucket provided with a swingable bail, said guard comprising an elongated strap of flexible, resilient material presenting a body having a central segment and a pair of opposed end segments integral with the central segment, said end segments being folded together in oppositely inclined overlapping relationship and interconnected to define a tapered, open ended passageway having a relatively large open end and an opposed smaller open end, said guard being configured to generally complementally accept a user's thumb by passing the thumb into said passageway through said relatively large open end in an orientation such that a portion of the body covers the metacarpophalangeal joint area of the thumb to protect such area from excessive force when the user holds a bucket with fingers under the bucket and the thumb is positioned beneath the bail to stabilize the bucket, said strap being sufficiently flexible such that the overlapping, interconnected end segments of the guard may be folded back so that when the guard is placed over a user's thumb by passing the thumb into said passageway through the larger end of the guard with the folded back portion of the body oriented adjacent the joint and thumb pad of a person's thumb, the guard protects the portion of the thumb pad of a user's thumb underlying the double folded portion of the guard from excessive stress while the user holds a bucket with fingers engaging the bottom portion of the bucket and the thumb is hooked over the bail.

16. (original) A method of protecting tissues of a person's thumb from excessive stress while holding a bucket provided with a swingable bail, said method comprising the steps of:  
providing a tubular, tapered body formed of flexible resilient material having a central segment and a pair of opposed end segments integral with the central segment, said end segments being folded together in oppositely inclined overlapping relationship and interconnected to define an open ended passageway configured to complementally receive a person's thumb and having a relatively large open end and an opposed smaller end, said strap being sufficiently flexible that the overlapping ends of the guard may be folded back to provide a double thickness of material; and

inserting a thumb into the passageway through the large end thereof with overlapping ends of the strap folded back oriented generally in disposition adjacent the person's thumb pad opposite the thumb nail so that the guard serves to protect the person's thumb joint and adjacent

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portions of the thumb pad from excessive stress when a bucket is held with fingers engaging the bucket and the thumb is hooked over the bail.

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